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## ABSTRACT

This action research study examines the stressors that impact the lives of working mothers (N=11). Ethnographic field notes, personal interviews, and a series of eight weekly group meetings were used to collect data. The prevailing stress discourse does not adequately describe working single mothers' experiences of stress, but instead separates women's identities into dichotomies (i.e., work and family). The new conceptual framework for stress that guided the design of this study moved beyond dualistic models that isolate the working mothers' experiences toward a more complex analysis, learning about the cospecification of both work- and nonwork-related stressors. This analysis consisted of contextualizing the women's lives in relation to Newton's (1995) five themes: history, gender issues, collective experience, emotions, and politics, as well as other interlocking variables such as age, race, class, and sexuality. Results indicate that dualistic models fail to describe the multiple realities in working single mothers' lives, and that the dominant stress discourse, which is individualistic, apolitical, and ahistoric, does not fully capture these women's experiences. A new conceptual framework that challenges the dominant stress discourse is presented. (Contains 28 references.) (Author/MKA)

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## **Moving Beyond Dualistic Models:**

## **Working Single Mothers and Stress**

**Paper presented at the  
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San Francisco  
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**by**

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## Moving Beyond Dualistic Models: Working Single Mothers and Stress

### Abstract

This action research study examines the stressors that impact the lives of 11 working single mothers. Ethnographic fieldnotes, personal interviews, and a series of eight weekly group meetings were used to collect data. The prevailing stress discourse does not adequately describe working single mothers' experiences of stress, but instead, separates women's identities into dichotomies (i.e., work and family). The new conceptual framework for stress that guided the design of this study moves beyond dualistic models that isolate the working single mothers' experiences, towards a more complex analysis, learning about the cospecification of both work- and nonwork-related stressors. This analysis consisted of contextualizing the women's lives in relation to Newton's (1995) five themes: history, gender issues, collective experience, emotions, and politics, as well as other interlocking variables, such as age, race, class, and sexuality.

The most widely accepted conceptualization of stress is Lazarus and Folkman's transactional model that defines stress as "a multivariate process involving inputs, outputs, and the mediating activities of appraisal and coping; there is constant feedback from ongoing events, based on changes in the person-environment relationship, how it is coped with and, therefore, appraised" (cited in Lazarus, 1990, p. 4). This prevailing stress discourse has focused on individual processes of coping and appraisal and, therefore, solutions to stress problems focus on individual accountability. Individuals are taught how to recognize signs of stress and are encouraged to learn coping skills to minimize stress. Meditation, exercise, and therapy are just a few of the techniques promoted to help an individual be "stress fit." While focusing on the individual experience of stress, the dominant stress discourse has overlooked: (a) commonalities faced by collective groups, (b) power inequalities inherent in many social structures, and (c) the context of one's life. Newton (1995) challenges this somewhat narrow view, and looks at the stressed subject in the context of history, gender issues, collective experience, emotions, and politics.

The purpose of this research is to better understand the relationship between the many individual and collective stressors that working single mothers face in balancing their complex lives. In agreement with Newton's perspective on the stress discourse, power imbalances inherent in many social structures are considered in this study, as well as the single mother's position in life. An elaboration on Newton's critique of stress in the workplace is also presented, considering stress in nonwork domains and expanding on the context of the single mother's life to include her position in relation to race, age, sexuality, and socioeconomic status.

The Stress Discourse: The Stressed Single Mother's Life Incomplete

Working single mothers' lives have been studied within dichotomies such as work versus family, paid work versus unpaid work, and work out of need versus work out of personal fulfillment (Tom, 1993). The first duality, work versus family, assumes that the working single mother can separate her "mother self" from her "employee self." She is expected to wear either a "mother hat" or an "employee hat," but is not expected to wear both hats at the same time. This is not a reality for working single mothers who are thinking of childcare arrangements while business meetings extend beyond allocated time frames, and are thinking about work deadlines while they read bedtime stories to their children.

The second duality, paid work versus unpaid work, also misrepresents the issues that single mothers face, and gives more power to paid work. Women who connect more with work are often seen as neglecting their children, whereas single mothers who stay at home at the expense of their careers are seen as "good mothers." This duality assumes that single mothers experience a degree of financial security, and can choose whether they want to work outside the home. This is not a reality for the more than 50% of Canadian single mothers who live below the poverty line (Higgins, Duxbury, & Lee, 1992).

The final duality places women as either working out of need or working out of personal fulfillment. This duality is oversimplistic and clearly does not describe all women's experiences of paid employment, but instead creates rigid stereotypes. Working-class women are often placed in "the work-out-of-need" category, whereas professional women are placed in the "personal fulfillment" category (Tom, 1993). In reality, a mother's employment provides many benefits besides purely financial ones.

Work also provides mothers with an opportunity for mental stimulation, a sense of purpose, and a means of building relationships (Baruch, Biener, & Barnett, 1987). Single mothers also seek employment so that they can serve as role models to their children (Tom, 1986). Despite these advantages, single mothers still face discrimination in our society if they seek full-time employment. Too often, working single mothers are accused of neglecting childcare responsibilities; they are labeled as inadequate parents; and their children are associated with delinquency rates (Dowd, 1997).

The separation of working single mothers lives into dualities prevents these women from being fully understood and assigns more power to one side of the dichotomy over the other. In Western culture, work has been given more prestige than family, yet single mothers who work outside of the home are often accused of neglecting childcare responsibilities. Clearly, these simplistic models that have separated the experiences of working single mothers into work and nonwork domains fail to capture the complexity of these women's lives. The new conceptualization of stress, which considers power imbalances as well as the context of the working single mothers' lives, provides a more comprehensive understanding of these women's experiences.

### Methodology

The majority of stress studies have focused on participants' reactions to a predetermined list of potential stressors and fail to capture the changing person-environment relationship. Using similar methods with working single mothers may, in fact, miss crucial stressors unique to the specific women in question. Action research, the methodology selected, provides an in-depth understanding of the working single mothers' experiences of stress. In this type of research, the

researcher “lives” the research questions, and the research itself becomes a form of living practice (Sumara & Carson, 1997). In this way, action research is a process, rather than a specific method. The principles of action research are consistent with feminist practices that adhere to a more equitable exchange of knowledge, challenge the notion of unequal power relations between the researcher and the researched, and teach that the research should be relevant to those involved (Harding, 1987).

### Participants

The research was conducted at a community counseling center in a suburb of a large city in Western Canada. Eleven working single mothers from diverse backgrounds participated in this study. There were three managers, three shift-workers, two mothers with special-needs children, one lesbian, and one Chilean woman. To protect the confidentiality of these participants, fictitious names are used in this text. The occupation of these women included: two nurses, two clerical workers, a legal assistant, a housecleaner, a postal worker, a supervisor at a taxi company, a manager in the social services sector, a bookkeeper, and a purchaser. The women ranged in age from 27 to 48 years. They had a minimum of one child and a maximum of three, ranging from 2 years of age and up. Eight of the women worked full-time (a minimum of 35 hours per week), and the other three worked part-time.

Three methods were used to gather data: ethnographic fieldnotes, interviews, and a series of eight weekly group meetings. The first method of data collection, ethnographic fieldnotes, served as a form of recording data before, during, and after the completion of fieldwork. My fieldnotes included key quotations from my readings, ideas for the layout of this study, notes about conversations with others about my research, and summaries of theoretical issues. Frequent

fieldwork entries were important, so that developments in the research, as well as transformations in my own thoughts, could be recorded. These fieldnotes influenced how I interpreted the data and the direction of forthcoming interviews and groups.

The second method, interviews, included phone interviews, initial interviews, and follow-up interviews. In response to advertisements, potential participants contacted me regarding participation in the study. In these phone interviews, the women were given a brief introduction to the study, were asked a few questions pertaining to demographic information, and were scheduled for an initial interview. The initial interviews were a means of providing the women with more information regarding the study, a time to sign consent forms, and a means of collecting additional demographic data. These preliminary interviews empowered the women to make informed decisions about their participation and fostered an egalitarian research process. The interviews were audiotaped and lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes.

The third and foremost method of data collection was a series of eight weekly group meetings. These meetings lasted for 2 hours in duration. The single mothers acted as co-researchers, in that each woman was invited to take responsibility for the content as well as for the process of the group. With respect to the content, the women made a list of topics they wanted to discuss, and brought relevant literature on these issues. With respect to the collaborative nature of the group process, the women discussed how they had to risk speaking up, lead discussions, distribute resources, and share in the ownership of the process. The group format fostered a sense of collectivity amongst the single mothers, reduced isolation, and provided the women with an opportunity to realize that many of their experiences have social causes. At



midpoint, questionnaires served to check that the women were content with the group process and served to provide recommendations for future meetings.

One month after the completion of the groups, follow-up interviews were conducted, and 3 months after the completion of the meetings, a follow-up group was conducted. The follow-up interviews and the follow-up group provided valuable feedback on the women's experiences of the research process, gave the women an opportunity to discuss any additional stressors, and served as a way of generating some closure on the women's experiences of the group.

### Data Analysis

In the analysis of this research, I go beyond a description of lived experience, phenomenology, to an interpretation of that experience, hermeneutics (Van Manen, 1990). Meaning was interpreted and reinterpreted several times before the final analysis was complete. A selective reading approach was used to identify themes in transcripts (Van Manen, 1990). In the selective reading approach the researcher reviews the text several times and then asks, "What sentences appear important to the meaning of the experiences?" Sentences that appeared important to the meaning of the women's stressful experiences formed a theme, and related themes were combined to form a concept. These concepts were juxtaposed on my theoretical readings and my interpretations of the women's experiences.

My interpretations and reflections were checked and rechecked with the single mothers on a continuous basis. Every week, I listened to each group tape and read the transcripts discussing key issues in our next meeting. In this way, the women and I were continuously interpreting and reinterpreting the meanings of their experiences, and collective agreement was an evolving process throughout the entire research project. This process of checking and rechecking

assumptions, data, and interpretations was used in an attempt to preserve the integrity of the women's experiences and to verify the validity of the findings (Leininger, 1992). It also removed me from the expert role and encouraged the women to share their views in a collaborative manner. Collaboration and negotiation of meaning were central concerns, both during the research process and in the postfieldwork phase. After the completion of fieldwork, the women were notified about how my interpretations were progressing, and received draft copies of the results. In response to the draft, the women made minor editorial comments, added to their quotations to elaborate on the meaning, and shared how the group had impacted them.

### Rethorizing Stress: The Stressed Single Mother in Context

#### History of Motherhood and Technology

The stressed working single mother is historicized with reference to two changing trends: motherhood and technological advancement. The history of motherhood is discussed in the context of the feminist movements. The first wave of feminism favored a position of equality and claimed that women are minimally different from men. This perspective assumes that one woman's voice is representative of all women, and does not acknowledge such different positionalities as gender, race, and class. The second wave of feminism stated that women's experiences are essentially different from men's. This second wave of feminism, therefore, acknowledged the differing gendered experiences of men and women and the ways in which these experiences have been shaped by patriarchy.

These representations of motherhood are oversimplistic and have often represented white middle-class experience (Collins, 1994). Such so-called universal views of motherhood clearly do not represent the many women who live below the poverty line, or women of visible minorities

who often rely on their own communities as a means of coping with the challenges of motherhood (Collins, 1994).

A glance at motherhood in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries confirms that the concept of motherhood is socially constructed (Gergen, 1991). During these centuries, children in France and England lived a marginal existence (Badinter, 1981). Affluent families sent newborns to wet nurses in the country, and as a result of insufficient milk and inadequate care, infant mortality was high. Poor families who could not afford this “luxury,” and who had no means of adequate birth control, often abandoned newborns. Clearly, motherhood in this context is very different from today’s Western construction of motherhood. These days, breastfeeding is considered a nutritional, as well as a bonding experience for mother and infant alike, and abandoning newborns is considered inhumane.

Technology also provides a historical context for the stress discourse. Rapid changes in technology have created extra work for many single mothers because they have to learn the latest advancements in order to keep up with the labour market. For many of these working single mothers, keeping up with the latest technology meant taking night classes which were financially taxing on their tight budgets. These classes also created childcare dilemmas, and were time consuming. Janet, who already worked two jobs, found these extra time pressures to be monumental. She described how she did not have time to learn a computer program in the evening:

*I said “Well, I’d like to learn how to use Windows. I have it on my computer at work, but I don’t know how to work it.” And he (her boss) goes, “Well, take the book home and read it at home.” I said “I don’t have any time at home, because I work two jobs.” “Then maybe you should give up one job.” “Maybe I can’t, you know.” (Janet later added “That 2nd job supplies the luxury of food.”)*

The history of motherhood and of changes in technology provide a historical context for understanding the working single mother's experience of stress. The social construction of motherhood in Western society expects working single mothers to put children's needs first. Single mothers, then, end up in a bind: Do they collect welfare and live on the edge of poverty? Or do they work, yet somehow put their children first? Technological advancements place further demands on single mothers and, in turn, the stress that many working single mothers already endure.

### Gender

Today Canadian families are not limited to the traditional family, wherein the father earns a living and the mother stays at home to care for children. In fact, there is only a marginal difference between the number of traditional Canadian families (16%) and the number of single parent Canadian families (13%) (Ministry of Women's Equality, 1994). Despite these trends, many single parent families headed by women in Canada have incomes that fall below the poverty line (Higgins et al., 1992).

Low wages often encourage single mothers to work long hours, which places extra strain on the demands of work and family life. Gender-based pay inequities perpetuate women's lower salaries. Some of the difference between men's and women's wages can also be explained in terms of educational level, age, and the concentration of women in low-paying positions (Peitchinis, 1989). The economic status of many single mothers has negative effects on parents and children alike. Poverty influences future employment opportunities, education, socioeconomic status, health, and self-esteem.

In addition to wage inequities, women also experience limited promotional opportunities. This type of discrimination against women in the workforce can be quite subtle. Haslett, Geis, and Carter (1996) document a scenario in which a male staff member, applying for a promotion, attempts to discredit a single mother who is applying for the same job; the man attempts to compromise her working abilities by asking other employees about the single mother's children. As a result, other employees begin to consider the ramifications to her children if the single mother receives the promotion, which probably entails longer hours. In this case, in accordance with the prevailing discourse on motherhood, the woman's role as a mother is given precedence over her role as an employee.

Besides this opposition between work and family, working women are also judged in relation to the familiar dichotomy between men and women. One popular discourse suggests that women are not able to cope with the stress of working and simultaneously raising a family; yet, men do not seem to have this problem. However, as indicated by Hochschild (1989), this is simply because men do not have the same domestic responsibilities as women. In reality, working women are still much more likely to make childcare arrangements, make lunches, and attend school functions, than their male counterparts.

Wage inequities, limited promotional opportunities, sexual discrimination, and gender-based-stereotyping are just a few of the types of discrimination that working single mothers face. These women also face biases in the community at large for their single-parent family structure. The stigma attached to single mothers was evident in this study as the women sought a name for the research group. Some of the women perceived the term "single" as implying that the mother was never married, even though she may have been separated or divorced. Some thought the

word single implied that one was looking for a man, and thus excluded single mothers who are lesbian. In other words, the term single focused on marital status and implied a deficiency in the family structure. With the exception of one woman, none of these women chose to parent alone, but were in marital or common-law relationships when they decided to have children. The term “lone” was discussed briefly and rejected by the women in the group. Lone reminded the women of the word alone and implied that single mothers could not have a support network, but must instead live in isolation. They decided not to refer to the group as an “employed single mothers’ group,” because the term employed did not capture the many hours of unpaid work required to rear children. Consequently, the women chose to name the group a “working single mothers’ group.” Despite the stigma attached to the term single, the women agreed to use this, because the community at large is aware that the term “single parent” describes a person who is the primary caregiver of children.

Cultural messages that continue to subjugate single mothers are prevalent in many forms. As the women discussed, it is more acceptable to stay in an unhappy relationship “for the sake of the kids” than to be a single mother. The women also heard comments such as: “Why can’t you keep a man?” “What is wrong with you?” “Why have you been married twice?” and “You can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar.” There is the perception that single mothers are not complete without a man. They are perceived as looking for a father for their children, looking for a man, and not being able to keep a man. This issue resonated through the women’s stories:

*Because I’m single, all of a sudden that means available, and I don’t think it means that, but they (in reference to her friends) see it that way. I just want them to lay off--and you’re all nodding your heads so I guess other people are experiencing the same kind of thing. (Julie)*

*The mental, emotional thing--that you're all of a sudden going to devour every single man around you. (Debbie)*

As a result of these cultural messages, single mothers are seen as a threat to other women friends who are in relationships. The single mothers were shocked that these old friends now treated them with suspicion. This uncertainty, in once-familiar relationships, led to increased levels of isolation in the women's lives.

Two of the single mothers were even accused of being gay because they were not in a relationship with a man and were not looking for one. The dominant message was that women who are not looking for a man are homosexual, men haters, or unhappy. Janet, a lesbian mom, faced this discrimination on a regular basis with comments such as, "You just haven't met the right man yet." In fact, the recurrent theme of being perceived as incomplete without a man was so prevalent that Janet decided to disclose her sexuality to the group. In a follow-up call, she explained that she had disclosed her sexuality because the theme of relationships was an important topic, and she wanted to be a part of the group. The silencing of Janet's sexuality would have meant that she silenced a part of herself. As a result of homophobia, she concealed this part of her identity on a daily basis at work and was forced to separate out parts of her identity in order to keep her job.

In addition to judgment from society at large, the single mothers faced judgment from their own extended families, who had fallen prey to society's bias. Debbie talked about how she had to defend her role as a single working mother to her father, who lectured her on the fact that no one else in their family had been a single mother. Julie, though she ended a physically abusive marriage, heard judgmental remarks from her mother, who had stayed with her father through a miserable marriage "for the sake of the kids." In contrast to Julie, Lisa's mother left her father

when Lisa was a year old. Nevertheless, Lisa's mother told Lisa not to leave her partner. Her mother witnessed Lisa being abused by her partner, but said "Don't leave him; nobody's perfect." Lisa's mother believed being abused was better than being alone.

Such cultural narratives blame the single mothers for their circumstances and encourage mothers to remain in relationships, regardless of whether their relationships are healthy. At least half of the women in the group were in physically abusive relationships with the father of their children, but still they heard messages such as, "He is not that bad." As a result of these cultural messages, the women began to internalize the abuse, blaming themselves, rather than the abuser. In this way, they shape their identities according to the norms of society, with messages such as, "If I did not complain as often, he would not hit me." Because these discourses encourage the internalization of self-blame, researchers need to be aware not only of what the participants say, but what they do not say. As described by Anderson and Jack (1991), "To hear women's perspectives accurately, we have to learn to listen in stereo, receiving both dominant and muted channels clearly and tuning into them carefully to understand the relationship between them" (p. 11). Further research exploring the role of cultural narratives in shaping and constraining the identities of single mothers will provide a more in-depth understanding of how these discourses contribute to their stress.

### Collective Experience

As discussed by Newton (1995), stress models that focus on individual traits depoliticize the problem of work stress. The implication of such models is that individuals are stressed as a result of character deficiencies, such as inadequate coping skills and personality traits.

Organizational stressors affecting certain groups are therefore obscured.



Working single mothers have not been studied as a group facing similar stressors. Instead, collective stressors have been considered individual problems. In reality, working single mothers must meet the typical demands of employees in the 1990s, while coping with a number of collective stressors. The majority of these single mothers experienced financial struggles. On a tight budget, single mothers have to use their resources wisely. In the following excerpt, Irene indicates that she is aware of how many eggs she had in the refrigerator when her son was accused of throwing eggs in the neighborhood:

*My son is often blamed for stuff because I'm not around. This man came and talked to me. He said that eggs had been thrown, and these boys said that it was Gavin. He was riding his bicycle with two eggs in his hand, and he went around the corner and "bang, bang," two eggs were thrown. So I talked to the R.C.M.P. officer who lives on our block, and he said it didn't come from that way, no. I looked at the patterns. All the eggs came from this way. I knew I had a dozen eggs. I went upstairs. I hauled a dozen eggs downstairs. When you're single and you've got a budget, you know what kind of food you've got. You automatically scan that fridge and you know what the kids are eating. You scan those cans; you know what's gone; you scan the bread. You just know. It's instinctive.*

Sarah and Janet also described how they experience financial strain. Sarah was frustrated because her annual job review had not been carried out. The pay increase that she anticipated was delayed, and she did not expect to receive retroactive pay. Janet described a scenario in which a store employee harassed her because she was unable to make more than a \$25.00 per month payment. She also discussed how she had to phone her former landlord repeatedly in order to get her damage deposit back. She talked about how draining situations like this are, because they are a constant fight. Other financial dilemmas for single mothers include not being able to afford basic supplies, services, and extra expenses. Sarah, for instance, was not able to afford house insurance, and she had been robbed twice in 6 months. Amy would have liked to treat her children to a movie outing once a month, but could not afford this luxury.

The majority of the mothers in the study would have liked to work part-time; however, this was not financially feasible. With expenses such as childcare, food, transportation, and accommodation, that are typically shared by both parents, single parents often need to work full-time. The challenge of supporting a family on one income is heightened for single mothers who experience gender-based discriminatory practices, occupy the majority of entry level positions, and have had intermittent absences from the labor force (i.e., childbirth) which have negative ramifications on promotional opportunities.

These money concerns were further exacerbated for the single mothers who did not receive child-support payments. Of the 11 women in the group, 5 never received child support, 1 received sporadic payments, 2 received child-support payments after enrolling in the Family Maintenance Enforcement Program (a government program designed to enforce payment), and the remaining 3 received child support on a voluntary basis. Fathers who do not pay child support often do not see their children on a regular basis, and therefore, do not feel obligated to send maintenance payments. Access and maintenance issues are very separate, but are often treated as one issue as emotional battles are played out between separated parents. It is not unusual for a father to refuse to pay child support because he is unhappy with custodial or visitation rights, or, as Irene said, noncustodial fathers often move in with new families and support those children instead of their biological children.

The absence of child-support payments has both short- and long-term effects for single mothers and their children. Short-term effects include the financial strains of raising a family on one income and paying for large expenditures such as housing, transportation, childcare, and food. Long-term effects include the poverty of single mothers in their retirement years (Pask,

1993). Pask's research examines the financial status of women throughout different life stages. In the early years of marriage, children are young, and expenses such as mortgage payments are high. In the middle years, home equity starts to build, and job salaries for those who have maintained full-time employment often increase. In the later years, savings are often at a peak, as mortgages have been paid off and salaries are at their highest.

Without child-support payments, with intermittent breaks in their own career paths, and with inadequate salaries, working single mothers are frequently unable to reach the latter saving cycle. Therefore, these women often reach their retirement years with minimal home equity, savings, or pension entitlements. Beverly, a 48-year-old single mother, explained how the poverty of women in retirement is of utmost concern to her:

*Retirement planning is an emotional thing for me, because I've done some research on the poverty of women. I work with the elderly and, unfortunately, I know that the statistics look very gray for women alone at that age. I don't want to dwell on it, but there are horrific statistics indicating that women do not do well financially and may do even worse financially in 20 years or so. I am really concerned.*

Clearly, sufficient incomes are an integral step in reducing stress and maintaining health for this population of women. Without pay equity in the workforce and without child-support payments, working single mothers in low-paying positions will rear children close to or below the poverty line, and these women will have minimal financial resources in their retirement years.

Besides financial strain, all of the women described themselves as being time-, energy-, and sleep-deprived, and therefore faced varying degrees of exhaustion and fatigue in their lives. Buying milk and paying bills, two seemingly simple tasks, gained a new level of complexity as children tagged along. Sarah looked at the humour of not having time alone to run errands:

*Someday, even just to pay your bills, to go to the bank machine and pay your bills --you can't do it without three kids touching everything around you, running out the door, doing*

*whatever, and you're yelling at them at the same time as you're doing it. It's a huge ordeal. Just a simple little errand. And half the time, I get out in the car and Jen's not wearing her shoes. (laughter)*

Owing to these multiple demands, these single mothers had minimal time for self-care and found it difficult to foster and cultivate relationships outside of work. Consequently, these women lead isolated lives, and did not have the necessary resources and support systems in times of crisis.

### Emotions

Emotional expression in private domains often differs from that exhibited in public domains. In the Western home, emotional expression is encouraged, and the repression of emotions is seen as harmful to both children and parents alike. Therapy, a somewhat familiar setting in the 1990s, also encourages the expression of emotions. At the workplace, in contrast to private domains, individuals often repress emotions.

Power imbalances, as well as socially constructed emotional responses, prevent women from expressing themselves freely at work. To gain approval in the workplace, women often remain detached from their emotions and adopt a masculine style (Hearn, 1993). Alternately, women can express their emotions at the expense of remarks such as, "She is too aggressive, or too emotional for this job." As discussed by Haslett et al. (1996), when a woman speaks vehemently, it is often discredited as an overreaction, whereas a man in the same situation is taken seriously. The assumption is that the man's issue must be important. Once again, stereotyping and discriminatory practices leave women employees in a double bind. If the woman speaks vehemently because she has not felt heard in the past, she is labeled overly emotional, whereas if she speaks mildly, the issue remains unnoticed.

Emotional expression is further constrained by explicit and implicit feeling rules (Hochschild, 1979). Explicit feeling rules are those imposed by management as a means of bettering the organization. For example, counselors are expected to emotionally detach from their clients at the end of each session so that they can see more clients in a given day. If employees do not conform to these explicit feeling rules they are seen as problem employees, and typically get fired, quit, or burn out. Other staff then recognize the price of not following feeling rules and succumb to them in order to survive (Fineman, 1985). Implicit feeling rules are those prescribed by employees themselves, as they learn to adapt to specific work environments. For example, a good counselor should be able to “switch off” at the end of the day.

Emotion rules discourage people from exhibiting emotions that are not deemed appropriate. Therefore, oppressed groups pay a greater price than dominant groups in a society where dominant groups set the norms and standards. For example, a female employee may feel uncomfortable listening to a sexist joke, but laughs (the socially accepted response to a joke) despite her feelings. The woman employee is in a double bind situation. She wants to fit in and be accepted as an equal employee (which means not “upsetting the apple-cart”), yet she does not want to be discriminated against.

An analysis of the explicit and implicit feeling rules in the working single mothers’ lives reveals that management and employee groups encourage the repression of certain emotions such as anger, sadness, guilt, and exhaustion. This repression contributes to the women’s experiences of stress. Repression of anger in the workplace serves management needs because employees are not encouraged to challenge the status quo. Instead, they are required to carry out their job responsibilities without question.

Lynn revealed how, as a woman, she is expected to silence her frustrations: “My boss doesn’t want me to assert myself; he wants me to be nice, just do my job.” Lynn was restrained by the explicit feeling rule, “It is not appropriate for women to assert themselves in this organization.” Consequently, she did not feel comfortable asserting herself in a supervisory position where she was in charge of approximately 45 male employees. Besides gender, there were at least two other interrelated factors, age and culture, that contributed to this explicit feeling rule in Lynn’s organization:

*Sometimes I’ve had to force my authority on them because they don’t have a lot of respect for someone who’s younger than them. Again, I don’t know if race is an issue, but I think it is. In East Indian culture, women are not expected to, or encouraged to be, in any way, shape or form, authorities over men. . . . You know, it depends on how long they have lived in Canada, and it depends on their personality too. But, I find they don’t accept authority from women, or white women. . . . There’s an East Indian lady who works at the office, and she’s very much a lady, very proper, a very nice person. She said that she never talks to the other drivers or anybody because she knows that they will not treat her the same way if she’s friendly with them. So, that’s not acceptable.*

Women, particularly if they are young, are not expected to assert authority in East Indian culture. Lynn learned this rule from an East Indian woman in the organization who refrained from talking to the drivers in order to maintain a level of respect from them. This cultural norm placed Lynn in a double bind. As a supervisor, she was expected to use her authority; however, as a young Caucasian woman in an office composed primarily of East Indian men, she was not expected to assert herself. If she asserted her authority, the men would not respect her, but if she did not assert her authority, she would be unable to carry out her job. As a result of this rule, Lynn repressed her anger and frustration, and consequently, felt stressed.

The repression of sadness also increases experiences of stress, because the employee’s expressed feelings are often in conflict with her actual feelings. For instance, Irene, a nurse,

described how explicit feeling rules such as “remain at an emotional distance from patients” were still endorsed by management groups, and sadness over emotional events, such as the death of a patient, were considered just a part of the job.

Besides anger and sadness, the working single mothers experienced recurring feelings of guilt. Contrary to popular belief, these women did not feel guilty for working outside of the home. They felt guilty for not being available to work extra hours when needed, for not spending more time with their children, for not being better able to provide financially, and for making brief phone calls home to check on their children. They also exhibited varying degrees of exhaustion as a result of the multiple demands in their lives. Employers perpetuated these feelings when they did not provide any flexibility for the single mothers. As a result, during times of need (such as when caring for a sick child), the working single mothers felt a sense of divided loyalty between their “mother selves” and “employee selves.”

Emotions such as determination and laughter had the potential to mitigate stress in these women’s lives; though in the workplace the expression of humor was often controlled by power-based relations and/or by feeling rules that associated laughter with reduced productivity. The group experience encouraged the single mothers to expose and challenge feeling rules and allowed the women to feel less isolated while facing the many challenges in their lives.

To reduce stress levels and burnout rates, future research needs to challenge the social construction of these feeling rules in an attempt to bridge the gap between employers’ expectations of the expression of emotions and employees’ inner feelings (Fineman, 1993). In addition, research that focuses on how emotional expression is influenced by variables such as gender and race, has much to offer the field of stress. To date, work settings have discouraged

the expression of emotions, and encouraged employees to deal with work stress in private arenas, such as employee assistance counseling programs (Newton, 1995).

### Politics

Stress is a political issue, however, it is often silenced. The politics of an organization revolve around issues of power, status, and control. With respect to power in the organization, staff groups and management groups typically do not agree on the causes of stress (Neale, Singer, Schwartz, & Schwartz, 1982). Staff groups focus on physical, environmental, and psychological stressors as stress precursors. Psychological stressors include factors such as lack of control over work process and content, lack of understanding supervisors, unrealistic task demands, and lack of job security. Not surprisingly, the context of a person's job is irrelevant to management, who emphasize individual differences between employees as factors contributing to stress. Management refer to stressors such as personality traits, lifestyle behaviors, interpersonal relationships, and family problems (Neale et al., 1982).

There are also gender-based differences in power. Women tend to be more conscious of being in powerful positions than men. In such positions, women typically acquire labels such as "bitchy" and controlling, whereas men in similar situations are referred to as confident and decisive (Gearing, 1994). Research also supports the notion that career women with more "egalitarian attitudes" (more feminine) experience greater stress than women with less egalitarian attitudes (Long, Kahn, & Schutz, 1992).

Both high-status and low-status positions in an organization impacted the stress that these working single mothers faced. Higher status positions, such as management, did not necessarily correspond with more decision-making power. Irene, for instance, who was a nurse in a



supervisory position, felt that she had minimal decision-making power, and that the hospital system was very hierarchical. Irene's lack of power and autonomy prevented her from doing her job properly, resulting in conflict with administration, and, subsequently, increased stress levels.

Women in less powerful positions were also silenced because of their fears about job security. The single mothers described how they did not have the luxury of leaving a job if they experienced discrimination, and therefore ended up in a "Catch 22" situation. Their employers knew that they needed the job out of financial necessity and, therefore, could place unrealistic demands on them; yet because the single mothers needed their jobs, they did not feel comfortable expressing themselves. Many single mothers are also in clerical positions and are aware that such positions are hard to find. These low-paying positions also correspond to minimal decision-making power, which leads to increased experiences of stress for some women (Ganster, 1988).

Relationships with supervisors were also critical factors in determining whether women were able to make the decisions required to carry out their jobs. Supervisors who were controlling, were verbally abusive, and were disrespectful of employees created tension for those involved. As such, these working mothers felt powerless, on edge, and unsupported in their places of employment. Janet, for instance, described incidents in which one of her supervisors was verbally abusive. Consequently, she often felt tense at work and felt like she was "walking on egg shells." This type of abuse in the workplace affects other employees as well. In one case, a colleague left work in tears over this verbal abuse. However, like Janet, she silenced her frustrations, because she did not want to risk losing her job.

In contrast, supervisors who were sensitive to the needs of the working single mothers (i.e., allowing time away from work to attend to sick children) fostered a commitment to the

organization and alleviated some of the challenges that these women faced in balancing their lives. The women described these supervisors as collaborative, not controlling, as respectful, not rude, and as flexible, not rigid.

Minimal decision-making power, and strained relationships with supervisors were challenges that many of the working single mothers faced. Women who were not involved in making decision that affected their jobs often felt powerless and consequently, appeared less invested in their work. These women also tended to experience limited respect from their employers and to encounter discrimination-based practices. Such employers offered these women minimal flexibility in their schedules, and conveyed a lack of understanding about their roles as single mothers.

Family-friendly benefits, such as flextime, childcare services, job sharing, special-leave days, extended parental leave, and eldercare services, can mitigate the stress levels that single mothers experience. There is not one blanket solution to resolve the individual and collective challenges that these women face on a daily basis. Solutions to stressful situations differ from group to group. An ideal solution for one population may be an adverse solution for another. Flexible part-time work, for instance, may be an effective solution for professional single mothers, but a devastating solution for single mothers who are struggling to earn an adequate income on a full-time salary. These workplace benefits need to be respected and endorsed by management groups. Benefits that exist in theory (i.e., in the company policy manual), but not in practice (i.e., management does not endorse them), do not alleviate stress. The relationship between family-related benefits that exist in theory but not in practice, and variables such as absenteeism,

turnover, and morale, need to be more fully studied in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of single mothers' experiences of stress.

### Summary

The results of this study indicate that dualistic models fail to describe the multiple realities in working single mothers' lives, and that the dominant stress discourse, which is individualistic, apolitical, and ahistoric, does not fully capture these women's experiences. Working single mothers' stressful experiences need to be considered in the context of their many relationships and positionalities (i.e., gender, race, class), a context that acknowledges that women's lives are woven together in a complex way. The new conceptual framework for stress presented here challenges the dominant stress discourse moving beyond dualistic models that isolate working single mothers' lives, and locates these women in the context of history, gender, emotions, politics, and collective experience as well as other interlocking positionalities such as age, race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status.

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